

EPILOGUE TWELVE YEARS LATER

Fred pushed open the door to the Ritz and strode towards the tea room as fast as he could go without running. He ignored the excited whispers from a crowd of boys following him across the foyer.

Max jumped up when he saw Fred coming and knocked over the sugar bowl. He was tall, now — as tall as Fred — and his face no longer had its baby roundness, but his eyebrows still pointed upwards at the ends.

'You came! We thought you might still be on expedition!' He embraced Fred, crushing him hard around the arms.

'Fred!' Lila had grown beautiful — so beautiful that



Fred always hesitated each time they met, feeling oddly embarrassed, until she grinned at him. Her wonky tooth, slightly wonkier now, was still there. She gave him a bear hug. 'How was your trip? You've been in all the papers. "A new kind of explorer", they say.'

Before he could answer, a voice came from behind them. 'You all look so smart,' it said. 'You should have told me - I would have worn my ruffles.'

'Con!' said Max.

At first glance, Con looked very like she had done that first morning at the airfield, still with a jutting jaw, still at right angles to herself. But the blonde curls were gone, as was the expression of distrust. She wore her hair in a bob, high-waisted trousers and a felt hat that looked just a little like a pith helmet.

The hat had in fact been a Christmas present from Fred the year before. Fred's father still called the upstairs spare bedroom 'Con's room'.

A waitress approached with an armful of menus.

'Thank you,' said Con, 'but we decided what to have a long time ago.'

'Could we have one of every cake on the menu?' asked Fred.

'And four hot chocolates,' said Max. He grinned. 'In honour of the grub pancakes.'

As soon as the waitress had gone, Lila reached under the table. 'I brought someone to celebrate with us. He's very, very old. The waitress might not like it, though - can you make a barrier from your coats?' She lifted a bundle of grey fur from the wicker basket by her side. Very, very slowly, it opened its eyes.

'Baca!' said Fred.

'He's grown so enormous!' said Con.

'He's a very respectable old man these days,' said Lila. 'But he used to be such a terror.'

'A very slow-motion terror,' said Max.

'He kept trying to eat the covers of my biology textbooks.'

They passed Baca from hand to hand. His fur was less fluffy and he moved creakily, but his eyes were shining black and his nose was still inquisitive. He

raised one slow arm and scooped a lump of brown sugar towards him.

Then Fred held out his hand, palm up. It was very faint now, the mark, but you could still see it. 'Still a secret?'

Lila held out her hand. 'Still a secret.'

Max spread his hand on the tablecloth. 'Of course.'

'Always,' said Con.

Fred looked down at their four upturned palms; his own was still covered in burns and blisters from his last expedition, Lila's speckled with animal scratches, Con's stained with ink.

Max broke the silence. 'Do you think he's still there?'

'I don't know,' said Fred. 'But I'll find out soon. I'm going back to the Amazon, as soon as the rains are over. I'm going to try to find it again.'

'But not to take anyone else to see it?' said Con.

'No!' said Fred. 'Of course not. Just to say we survived. Just to say we kept exploring.'

